

THE 2002 REVIEW OF FLORIDA'S TWENTY-FIVE LONG RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLANS

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Federal and state transportation laws require that a long range transportation plan (LRTP) be developed in urban areas with populations above 50,000. The agency responsible for conducting the long range transportation planning process is the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). The Florida Metropolitan Planning Organization Advisory Council (MPOAC) assists individual MPOs in carrying out the urbanized area transportation planning process by serving as the principal forum for collective policy discussion.

In 1997, the MPOAC asked the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) to conduct a review of the LRTPs of the state's twenty-five MPOs to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues and concerns facing Florida's MPOs and the manner in which those issues and concerns were being assessed and documented in the long range transportation planning process. The study resulted in several suggestions for improving the regional transportation planning process and for documenting that process in the LRTPs, in terms of both technical approach and structure.

In 2000, CUTR was asked to conduct a comparative review of the updated long LRTPs produced by the Florida MPOs located in clean air non-attainment areas (i.e., areas with air quality problems). In general, that review identified a number of improvements, in various areas, over the 1997 LRTPs. However, many of the same issues and challenges identified in the 1997 study were still apparent.

OBJECTIVES

Each MPO has since completed at least one update cycle since the initial review in 1997. Additionally, federal transportation legislation has added a few new emphasis areas for LRTPs and provided slightly different guidance to direct the long range transportation planning process. Therefore, the primary objective of this research was to re-evaluate the twenty-five MPO LRTPs. Special attention was to be given to the methods used to establish project priorities, to identify needs, and to move projects from needs plans to cost feasible plans.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In general, the quality of the most recent LRTPs improved significantly when compared to those reviewed in 1997 and 2000. Overall, plan documents were more user-friendly. They also contained less jargon and richer descriptions of issues and challenges. There appeared to be a more balanced reliance on modeling and a more obvious assessment of a wider range of planning considerations than roadway level-of-service deficiency. There were numerous examples of innovative public involvement efforts and improved regional and interagency coordination. There was an increase in the consideration of potential social and community impacts in the decision-making process and thoughtful inclusion of community concerns into the decision-making process.

A variety of methods were used to select projects for the cost feasible plan—the most popular approach was the use of a weighted prioritization formula. Almost all of the MPO plans incorporated the concepts of multimodalism and intermodalism, including such alternative strategies as intelligent transportation systems, corridor management, and transportation demand management. Even so, financial shortfalls between the costs of identified needs and reasonably available revenues remained a significant and widespread phenomenon. When added together, the statewide 20-year shortfall estimate is \$37.7 billion (in year 2000 dollars)—a 43% increase over the 1997 statewide shortfall estimate.

Although the 2002 review identified numerous improvements in long range transportation planning around the state, additional actions could be considered. Whereas some MPOs integrated a strong visioning process and/or principles of strategic planning into their long range transportation planning processes, many did not. Almost all MPOs included goals dealing with safety and economic competitiveness, but few systematically considered these issues. Most MPOs recognized the interaction between transportation and land use in their policy statements, but alternative land use scenarios rarely were considered. All MPOs identified goals, objectives, and policies to guide their long range transportation planning process, but the final list of cost feasible projects was not always clearly linked to those goals, objectives, and policies. There was no statewide consistency in how needs and expected revenues were identified, in what the composition of these estimates should be, or in how this financial information was reported. Several MPOs staged the implementation of projects included in their cost feasible plan, but few identified a specific mechanism for project programming in their LRTP.

Specific observations included the following:

- In general, plan documents are better organized, more user-friendly, and significantly more descriptive.
- Public involvement approaches improved dramatically throughout the state.
- Only a few MPOs integrated a strong visioning process or strategic planning principles into their long range transportation planning process.
- The final list of cost feasible projects was not always clearly linked to LRTP goals, objectives, and policies.
- MPOs across the state employed various methods used to move projects from need plans to cost feasible plans.
- There was a somewhat more balanced reliance on transportation modeling and other considerations in plan development than was observed in previous plan reviews.
- A large shortfall between revenues and needs plan costs remains a significant and widespread phenomenon.

Clear and significant improvements have been made in both the long range transportation planning processes around the state and in individual plan documents. The plan documents are better organized, easier to read, and significantly more descriptive. Public involvement and regional coordination was dramatically improved and the process is less reliant on modeling and includes a wider range of planning considerations. While clearly improved, additional enhancements could still be made—a series of suggestions are offered within the report. In light of the improvements already made, however, MPOs will clearly continue to increase the value of Florida's regional long range transportation planning practices.

BENEFITS

MPOs are required to develop and update their LRTPs on a five year cycle. For MPOs in air quality non-attainment areas, the term of the cycle is three years. These plans are submitted to the federal government and used to determine the funding for transportation improvements. In fact, individual project funding is linked to the LRTPs, so the value of these plans to the MPOs and their respective communities, as well as to the State, is significant.

CUTR's role in this process has been to perform a quality assessment of these plans, which it has done for the last two submittals. The assessments point out both the strengths and the weaknesses of the respective plans, and serve as the basis for a compilation of best practices which can be used by FDOT and MPO staff to strengthen their ongoing planning processes to produce more effective and relevant LRTPs. Furthermore, because the findings are public information, they allow citizens residing within MPOs to become aware of and involved in issues that affect them.

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